



Conversion: An Intellectual Transformation

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CONVERSION: AN INTELLECTUAL TRANSFORMATION

When an individual belonging to one religious group joins another religious group after converting to that religion that, in religious terminology, is called proselytism. But this is a limited concept of conversion, which needs to be viewed in a more scientific light.

The religious view of conversion relates only to religious tradition. In this respect it is relatively limited in its spectrum. The scientific outlook, on the contrary, is much broader in scope, being based on the eternal principles of nature itself. Although it would be proper to say that, in the religious context conversion for human beings is a matter of choice, in the scientific sense, this is not so. It is an eternal principle of life, in exactly the same way as the laws of nature have the status of being immutable. We are compelled to accept the principle of conversion, just as we are compelled to accept the morning following the evening, or one season coming after another.



ISLAM AND CONVERSION

Conversion in Islamic thought is not synonymous with proselytism in the formal sense. It is an event, which takes place in a person's life as a result of intellectual revolution or spiritual transformation. It is not simply leaving one religious tradition for another. The Islamic ideal of conversion is for the individual to discover the truth after an exhaustive search for it and then by his own choice, abandon one religion for another.

During his final phase in 6 A.H., the Prophet Muhammad, may peace be upon him, sent letters to the neighbouring rulers of his time, by which they were directly invited to accept the message of Islam. For instance, in his letter to the Byzantine Emperor Heraclius I, the Prophet wrote these words: "Accept Islam and you will be blessed with peace." Similarly at any gatherings which took place in Makkah, the Prophet would make a point of going to that place and address the assembled people thus: "O people, say there is no god but God and you will attain God's grace."



At first glance this was an invitation to people to change their religion. But the study of the Qur'an tells us that it was in actual fact an invitation to a transformation in thinking, and not a change of religion in the simple sense. In the first phase of Islam, some Arab Bedouins had accepted Islam just by reciting the *kalima*, the creed of Islam, while they had not undergone any change in character at a deeper level. The Qur'an admonished them in strong terms:

The Arabs of the desert say 'We believe.' Say.
"You have not believed yet; but rather say,
'We have accepted Islam, for the true faith has
not yet entered into your hearts.'" (49:14).

From this we learn that conversion according to Islam means a thorough transformation of the person and not just a change of religion in the everyday sense.

There is a formal method of religious conversion prevalent among the Jews and Christians known as baptism. In this ritual ceremony, the convert is dipped in water. The hue of water is considered a symbol of purity, and their priests believe that



dipping someone in pure clean water purifies him, and he is thus converted to a new religion. But pouring water outwardly does not purify a person, for the attainment of purity necessitates a transformation of the total human personality. The convert is suffused with the hue of God and he adopts God's ways in thought, word and deed.

As the Qur'an puts it:

We take on God's own dye—and who has a better dye than God's? And we are His worshippers. (2:138).

The Qur'an refuses to give its seal of approval to conversions, which are mere formalities. In ancient Madinah there was the case of about three hundred people having become Muslims by reciting the Islamic creed. To all intents and purposes they even said their prayers, and fasted, but they did all this in a hypocritical manner, paying only lip service: their inner state did not correspond to their outward pronouncements. They claimed allegiance to Islam by word of mouth but, as regards the state of their hearts, the Islamic spirit was lacking. The Qur'an branded the 'Islam' of such people as a falsity:



When the hypocrites come to you, they say:

‘We bear witness that you are God’s apostle.’
God knows that you are indeed His
Messenger, and God bears witness that the
hypocrites are lying. (63:1)

What is meant by true religious conversion is illustrated by an incident in which some verses from the Qur’an were read to a gathering of Christians. About seventy of them were so deeply moved that they abandoned their ancestral religion and converted to Islam. As the Qur’an puts it: When they listen to that which was revealed to the Messenger, you will see their eyes filled with tears as they recognize its truth. They say: ‘Lord, we believe. Count us among Your witnesses. Why should we not believe in God and in the truth that has come down to us? Why should we not hope for admission among the righteous?’ (5:83-84)

Similarly, the Qur’an speaks of true believers “as those whose hearts are filled with awe at the mention of God, and whose faith grows stronger as they listen to His revelations. They are those who put their trust in their Lord, pray steadfastly, and



spend of that which We have given them. Such are the true believers. They shall have degrees with their Lord and shall be forgiven by Him, and a generous provision shall be made for them. (6:2-4)

This shows that religious conversion in actual fact is the result of a realization. When the individual's search for truth finds a convincing answer, it is such a profound experience that his heart is intensely moved. His eyes are filled with tears. His whole existence is moulded in the cast of truth. It is then that he emerges a new and altogether different person, having undergone a transformation.

That is why the Qur'an uses no synonym for conversion. To express the act of conversion, other more meaningful words have been used, for instance, the *da'wah* mission (the communication of the message to others) of Islam finds mention in the Qur'an in these words:

A light has come to you from God and a glorious Book with which He will guide to the paths of peace those that seek to please Him. He will lead them by His will from darkness

to the light; He will guide them to a straight path. (5:15-16)

Those who enter the fold of Islam after being influenced by their study of the Qur'an, have been thus described in the Qur'an:

Is then he who knows that what has been revealed to you by your Lord is the truth, like him who is blind? Truly, none will take heed but the wise. (13:19)

According to this verse, the real conversion is one, which has taken place when the convert is aware that he has entered the phase of gnosis and has left behind the phase of ignorance. That is why a tradition of the Prophet speaks of the period prior to Islam as a period of ignorance.

Similarly, the difference between a believer and a non-believer has been alluded to in the Qur'an in the context of life after death: 'Can the dead man whom We have raised to life and given a light with which he may be guided among men, be compared to him who blunders about in a darkness from which he will never emerge?' (6:123)





This same reality has been expressed in different ways in the Qur'an, for instance, by the simile of the earth. When the rains come, the fertile earth blooms, becoming green with vegetation. 'Good soil yields fruit by God's leave. But poor and scant are the fruits, which spring from barren soil. Thus we show our signs to those who render thanks.' (7:58)

Then there is the parable of the tree:

Do you not see how God compares a good word to a good tree whose root is firm with its branches in the sky, yielding its fruit all the time by God's leave? God gives parables to men so that they may become mindful. But an evil word is like an evil tree torn out of the earth, and has no stability. God will strengthen the faithful with His steadfast word, both in this life and in the Hereafter. He leaves the wrongdoers in error. God accomplishes what He pleases. (14:24-27)

These verses from the Qur'an tell us the difference between one who has found the truth and one who has failed to do so. The latter is like the shrub growing on the upper surface of the soil: it is short-



lived, either vanishing on its own or being pulled out, and is of no use to mankind. The former resembles a profitable, fruitful tree putting its roots deep down into the earth. It seems that it is for the earth and the earth is for it. Receiving sustenance from the earth as well as the atmosphere, it benefits people in many ways. Rooted as it is in the earth, it has a desirable and meaningful existence.

CONVERSION—A UNIVERSAL PRINCIPLE

Another aspect of conversion, pointed out repeatedly in the Qur'an, is that it is not confined solely to religion. It is rather a universal principle, by which all kinds of progress have been set in motion. The present universe was originally composed of condensed matter, then it underwent a process of internal change, by which it began expanding until this vast universe, with which we are now familiar, was formed. (21:30). Similarly, the earth lies dry and barren, then it is transformed by the rain so that, "it begins to stir and swell, putting forth every kind of radiant bloom." (22:5)



Again, some apparently unformed matter passes through well-defined stages in the womb, until it assumes the form of a complete living creature—this goes for both humans as well as animals. Then grass and grains enter the cow's belly and, by a certain natural system undergo a transformation, until grass and grains are converted into milk, a very precious food for man (16:66).

By citing such natural phenomena, the Qur'an demonstrates how this world has been established on the universal principle of conversion. Here all kinds of progress are instigated through the process of transformation. For instance, the combination of two gases resulting in water, iron being transformed into steel, chemical combinations of various kinds producing useful metals, etc.

All these are examples of conversion in its broader sense. The same kind of conversion is at work in the world of human thought. There is an ongoing interchange of ideas in this world. Through this process one school of thought gives way to another, better school of thought. For instance, for several hundred years the geo-centric theory of the solar



system dominated world thought. Then as a result of intellectual advances it began to erode, until finally it was rejected by the academic world, being replaced by the helio-centric theory, this having stood the test of observation. Conversion in the world of thought is called religious conversion, which is only a small part of the vaster scheme of nature.

The truth is that conversion is a universal law established by nature itself, on the basis of which all the material progress of the modern world has been taking place. Just as the physical growth of living beings (humans and animals) has depended wholly on this principle of conversion, so also has all the progress made in the world of thought over thousands of years. That is, theories have become established truths when proven by available facts. In this world no meaningful development can take shape without going through this process of conversion. This is especially true of the acceptance of religion, which is another name for recognition of spiritual truth. Only that religion can become one's own, which has been discovered as a result of personal struggle. Religion is deeply related to



conviction and conviction in turn is related to discovery. There is no conviction without discovery and there is no religion without conviction.

The true follower of a religion is not one who is simply born into it. Finding religion must be a matter of conviction and is possible only after a long period of self-analysis. Then the would-be adherent should feel that he is rediscovering something of which he is already in possession.

THE REALITY OF CONVERSION

Conversion does not mean just saying some formal words, changing one's name and leaving one cultural group to join another. It entails not just an outward change of religion, but a profound alteration of the mindset after passing through many stages of soul-searching and self-analysis. Conversion, in essence, is the emergence of a new individual—one of the most significant events of human history, for it is only with the proliferation of such spiritually reformed personalities that any given society will attain true moral uplift, and reach the highest levels of achievement.



Conversion, in reality, is an event resulting from a sense of discovery. After making a great discovery, one does not remain as before. One becomes a new man. Only a truly revolutionary change of this kind merits the name of conversion. When it does take place, it stems from personal decision-making, and not from greed or external pressures. It causes those lacking in awareness to become intellectually receptive; the dormant come fully alive in all their senses; the morally “blind” gain a code of ethics; the non-curious develop a questing spirit; those living in a circumscribed environment suddenly enter a world without limits, where they can breathe freely; creatures existing at the purely physical level rise above it and begin really to live on a higher conceptual plane; the aimless wanderer, becoming spiritually focussed, learns the secret of leading a purposeful life.

CONVERSION—A HEALTHY HISTORICAL PROCESS

A few years ago I went through a book by an Indian writer called *The Politics of Conversion*. I found that there was only one point on which I differed from the author and that was the choice of title for the



book. I felt that it might more justifiably have been called *The Politicisation of Conversion*. This would have underscored the necessity to avoid the sensationalism of giving a political hue to something, which was, after all, a natural reality.

What is conversion? Usually conversion is equated with proselytism. But conversion, in its broadest sense, is much further-reaching, in that it is a universal principle of nature. It is a historical process—healthy and inexorable—and attempting to put a stop to it would be like trying to put a stop to history itself. And who in this world has the power to do so? Conversion, in reality, is the birth of an entirely new entity resulting from the encounter between old and new schools of thought. This is a universal law established by nature itself.

The study of human history reveals that a certain process is always at work, which Karl Marx had wrongly called dialectical materialism. More rightly this is a dialogue-conversion process. That is, when two systems of thought clash with each other, an intellectual revolution ensues.



This dialogue-conversion process is the only ladder to all kinds of human progress. That is, whenever any revolution of civilization has been produced or a human group has succeeded in performing some great creative role, it has always come in the wake of this same dialogue-conversion process.

There is no single form of this process. It can be religious or non-religious in nature. In the history of the last fifteen hundred years we find two major examples—one of religious conversion and the other of secular conversion.

The history of the Arabs provides the example of religious conversion. Up to the sixth century A.D., the Arabs led a confined tribal life under the idolatrous system. Then at the beginning of the seventh century, there appeared the religion of monotheism, Islam. In consequence, intensive dialogue began between the monotheists and idolators. This dialogue assumed such an aggressive character that it came to the point of collision. As a result a new way of thinking was born among the Arabs, which went on growing till it took the form of a great intellectual revolution.



This intellectual revolution, or this discovery of a new idea, resulted in the emergence of a new personality among the Arabs. In the words of a European historian, every one of them acquired such a revolutionary personality that their entire people became a nation of heroes. Within just fifty years they brought about that historical event which is called by a historian “the miracle of all miracles.” Briffault puts this in a nutshell: “But for the Arabs, western civilization would never have arisen at all.”

Another example is that of the European Christian nations. After the crusades—a historical process extending over several hundred years—these nations too went through a conversion process. This conversion was secular rather than religious. Intense conflict took place between science and religion. This is elucidated in the book: *Conflict Between Science and Religion*.”

This encounter continued for several hundred years in the form of dialogue and conflict, until a new intellectual revolution was produced within the European nations and they finally bade good-bye to



the old and opted for the new. This revolution is known as the Renaissance.

It was this revolution which enabled the European nations to perform the greatest feat of history, i.e. emerging from the traditional age into the age of science. The truth is that the human mind is a treasure house of unlimited power. In normal situations the human brain remains in a dormant state. It is only external shocks, which awaken it, and the greater they are, the greater the intellectual revolution within man. This shock treatment produces in man what psychologists call brainstorming. This brings about a fresh intellectual outlook, a transformation that elevates a normal man to the level of a superman, who is then able to perform great feats.

Religious conversion is only a small part of this whole process. When the dialogue-conversion process is set in motion, it cannot have limits set to it. It is not possible to allow one kind of conversion and to prohibit another. Being a stormy process, it is boundless.



It must be appreciated that there are two major kinds of religious conversion—inner faith conversion and inter faith conversion. Now let us take an example of inter faith conversion. There was a multi-lingual Bengali Doctor of Philosophy, Nishi Kant Chattopadhyay, who, having first studied philosophy, then all major religions, faced intellectual confrontation with different faiths. Finally he made an intellectual discovery in consequence of which he left his ancestral religion, Hinduism, in favour of Islam. His Muslim name was Azizuddin. He delivered a lecture, published later under the title, *Why I Have Embraced Islam*, which describes in detail the story of his intellectual development. This lecture has been reproduced in one of my Dawah Booklets – A Case of Discovery.

There have also been instances of men and women who were born in Muslim families, who later cast off their family religion in order to turn into secularists, or even atheists in some cases. However, sooner or later they reached a turning point in their lives when they came back to Islam as sincere practicing Muslims.



The author of this book is an example of this kind of inner faith conversion. He was born in a Muslim family and until 1942, kept on performing all religious duties and rituals under the influence of the family. Then, an intellectual revolt took place in his mind against Islam and consequently he became a totally irreligious person for many years to come. It was not until 1948, after five years of systematic analytical study of modern philosophy, science and religion that the author was fully convinced of the continuing relevance and credibility of Islam and decided to return to it again. But, this time it was a return, or conversion, to a consciously chosen and rediscovered Islam, not to the traditionally inherited one.

To sum up, conversion is a universal and inescapable law of nature. A study of psychology and history tells us that, in order to give a new impetus to an individual or a group and to bring about a moral and intellectual revolution, what is most effective is the sense of discovery. This feeling of having discovered some truth, which was as yet unknown, awakens all the dormant powers of the individual. This feeling turns an ordinary man into



a superman. It is such supermen who cross the ocean, who scale mountains, and who by their heroic character cause history to enter a new age. Today, human history is once again facing a deadlock. History is once again in need of people who pass through this experience of a discovery. For it is such people, charged with new spiritual power, who will give a strong push to human history to enter a new and a better age.